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SUBJECT: CHINA NATIONAL DAY IN HCMC FALLS FLAT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: China's National Day reception in HCMC was drab and declassé in comparison with the previous two years. Last year, local diplomats and businesspeople were struck by China's "charm offensive" and its increasing influence in Southeast Asia in particular. The Chinese hosts were confident, outward-looking, and magnanimous and their event was technically sophisticated and elegantly understated. This year, the hosts appeared withdrawn, the multimedia execution was flawed, and the "cultural" performances were Chinese kitsch. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) Principal Commercial Officer and ConOff, both Chinese speakers, represented the U.S. Congen at the event hosted by China's CG and Dean of the Consular Corps, Madame Gao Deke. The majority of the 300 guests were elderly, badly-dressed Vietnamese men, wearing labor hero or other Communist medals. Most seemed to know each other and congregated in small groups to talk, drink, eat, and smoke. They did not interact with their Chinese hosts beyond exchanging greetings. There were only five or six Westerners present, not counting hotel management. The old Vietnamese cadres ignored the Westerners, the Chinese, and the few younger persons in attendance. The Chinese hosts engaged almost exclusively a small number of Chinese, Hong Kong, and international businesspeople.

¶3. (SBU) Madame Gao gave a 15-minute speech in Chinese with Vietnamese consecutive interpretation. English translation was projected on four screens visible from all points in the room. Whereas last year's English translation was smooth, this year's was imperfect and the person controlling projection of the text evidently did not know English; the text was consistently behind or ahead of the speech. The speech was almost drowned out by the roar of conversation throughout the room. The inattention of this year's audience also contrasted with respectful attention paid to Madame Gao at last year's event. Madame Gao began by acknowledging the accomplishments of the Chinese people, "under the leadership of the Communist Party," which have allowed China develop from a "poor country" into a "relatively prosperous socialist country." The modesty of this statement was a striking contrast to the confident, internationalist tone of her remarks last year. With regard to the Sino-Viet bilateral relationship, Madame Gao focused on trade statistics and the several bilateral high-level state and Party visits of the past year.

¶4. (SBU) The Vietnamese speaker was HCMC People's Committee Vice Chairman Nguyen Thanh Tai who's speech was devoid of content beyond the traditional fraternal socialist friendship between Vietnam and China.

¶5. (SBU) Following the speeches and toasts, there was a series of "cultural performances" with performers dressed in curious outfits. Some young women wore an amalgam of colorful "ethnic" blouses and variously-shaped hats, with mini-skirts and high-heel knee boots. A couple of young men wore vaguely Uighur-looking short vests with no shirts, and gym shoes. The sound system seemed not be functioning properly and the music

and singing were badly distorted. As the performances went on, the old Vietnamese cadres paid no attention and simply shouted more loudly to each other.

16. (SBU) Comment: What was most notable about this event was the lack of meaningful interaction among guests and between hosts and guests. At last year's event, the Chinese hosts made an effort to engage all the guests and to introduce the Westerners to Chinese businesspeople and Vietnamese officials. This year, they appeared to make no such effort. Also notable was the absence of younger, successful-looking guests. Judging from this event, the Chinese Consulate General in HCMC is not reaching out to the next generation of Vietnamese leaders and entrepreneurs, but is careful to sustain its relationship with old Party cadres. The Chinese friends of these cadres appear not to be as interested as they were last year in engaging Westerners or in showing the elite of Ho Chi Minh City that China is a future-looking power in Southeast Asia.

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